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->From the Editor's Keyboard
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"Saying it like it is!"

So much I wanna say, so little time. It will have to wait until next week because I have deadlines to meet. <sigh>

This weekend marks the unofficial unofficial start of Spring - Daylight Savings Time occurs this Sunday. Sure, we lose an hour of sleep, but the days are longer, and eventually more nice. And it signifies that winter is quickly coming to an end. But until that happens in a couple of days, we need to get through this week's issue!

Until next time...

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!
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CLASSIC GAMING EXPO ANNOUNCES DATES FOR 2010 SHOW

CGE Services Corporation has announced that the 2010 Classic Gaming Expo will rock Tropicana Las Vegas on the weekend of July 31 and August 1, 2010. Now in its 12th year as the ultimate destination for retro-gaming aficionados, Classic Gaming Expo introduces the pioneers of video game design to the players who grew up with their creations. In previous years, the special guests at CGE have included such dignitaries as Ralph Baer (the 'father of home video games'), Nolan Bushnell (co-founder of Atari Inc.) and million-selling game designers like Al Alcorn (Pong), David Crane (Pitfall!) and Rob Fulop (Demon Attack). Luminaries like these will present keynote speeches at CGE 2K10, where they will reveal the behind-the-scenes stories of their greatest hits, answer questions and sign autographs for fans. Please check the official CGE Web site at www.cgexpo.com for an updated list of alumni who are expected to appear at this year's show.

A major portion of the expo is devoted to retailers and collectors who buy, sell and trade games, peripherals and gaming memorabilia. The main floor is a giant showroom for vintage game vendors as well as publishers who create

new games for classic systems. Classic Gaming Expo regularly attracts hardcore video game collectors from around the world; many of the rarest and most valuable games have changed hands at CGE. Yet there are also plenty of bargains to be had. Parents can introduce their kids to the Atari games they played as teenagers; collectors can fill the holes in their Nintendo libraries; amateur video game historians can learn about rare prototype games and game systems. Classic Gaming Expo meets all of these needs and more.

One of the show's most eye-opening exhibits is the CGE Museum, where over 1,000 of the most desirable video game artifacts are put on public display. These are the 'holy grails' of video game collectors - one-of-a-kind prototypes, limited-edition collectibles, rare hardware and ephemera. In previous years, the CGE museum has proudly displayed such precious items as the ultra-rare Stadium Events NES game (a copy recently sold for over \$13,000), the Nintendo World Championships 1990 cartridge (both the gray and gold versions, valued at \$18,000 and \$5,000 respectively), unreleased Atari systems and much more. Other attractions at Classic Gaming Expo: live music, a variety of game tournaments, dozens of classic arcade games set up for 'free play' (no tokens or quarters necessary!) and plenty of classic home game systems available for attendees to walk up and play at their leisure.

Another popular highlight is the Saturday-night CGE auction, where rare games, systems and memorabilia are sold to the highest cash bidder in a raucous atmosphere of collector camaraderie and one-upmanship.

Classic Gaming Expo 2010 is open to the public; gamers of all ages are welcome. The Early Bird admission price is \$25 for a weekend pass if you register on the CGE Web site before May 31st. The second-tier advance registration price will be \$30 between June 1st and July 1st, or passes can be had at the door for \$35. Admission is free for children 8 years old and under. Click the 'Discounts' tab at www.cgexpo.com for information on Tropicana Las Vegas special room rates for CGE attendees.

Please visit www.cgexpo.com for more details.

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ABOUT CGE SERVICES CORPORATION

Classic Gaming Expo is a production of CGE Services Corporation. Currently in its 12th year, Classic Gaming Expo remains the industry's only annual event dedicated to celebrating and preserving the history of electronic entertainment, bringing together industry pioneers, gaming enthusiasts and the media for the ultimate experience in learning, game-playing and networking.

Classic Gaming Expo (CGE) is a trademark of CGE Services, Corp.

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Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. So what's goin' on this week? Damned if I know. There are a lot of things I could talk about, I guess, but I'm not really hot about any of them.

There are two things that I'm kind of toying with right now, though. This ongoing thing with Toyota's cars (some of them) and the impending arrival of Daylight Saving Time this weekend (or last weekend if you're reading this late).

Let's start off with DST, shall we? Way back in the day, someone decided it'd be a good thing to 'adjust' the time of day so that it'd be light 'later' in the day and we could get more work done.

And I apologize, but Ben Franklin did not propose Daylight Saving Time, no matter what they said in NATIONAL TREASURE. He wrote an anonymous satire while Envoy to France suggesting that Parisians rise at the crack of dawn and thereby save on the cost of candles. Other things he mentioned, if I remember correctly, were taxing the sale of shutters and ringing church bells at dawn to wake people up.

I'm guessing that just about any kiwi could tell you that George Hudson of New Zealand was the first to propose the idea of DST, or "Summer Time".

Regardless of who came up with the idea and when it started being used, it remains a fixture in our lives... at least here in the states it does. It heralds the arrival of spring. As the days are getting longer, the "spring ahead" gives us a little later sunrise, but the sun is rising earlier and earlier anyway. Where it "comes in handy" is in the afternoon. While "standard" time would have the sun setting at, say, 6:30, now it's going to set at 7:30 and continue setting later each day until late in June, when the days will again begin to shorten.

And as with most things, while there is a positive aspect, there is also a negative. In this case, the positive is having an extra hour of daylight in the evening. The negative is that we'll get an hour less to sleep this Sunday morning. A small price to pay for all those evening walks and kids' baseball games and the extra time to cut the lawn.

As I said earlier, the other thing I want to mention is this habit Toyota cars have started to develop with out-of-control acceleration. What's up with that? First it was supposed to be because of the accelerator pedals getting stuck in the floor mat... yeah, I didn't buy that one either. Then they it turned out that there was a problem with the brakes not "kicking in" right away. "A safety feature", said Toyota. Now, in just the past week, there have been two instances of Toyotas (one a Prius and the other a Camry) accelerating without cause. One of them took the poor owner on a long ride on a California highway, at times forcing him to dodge through traffic at up to 95 miles an hour.

This incident would have been cast aside by the manufacturer and dealers as well, I'm guessing, if it weren't for one thing: It was witnessed by a police officer. The cop said that when he caught up with the runaway car, he could smell the burnt brakes and could see that the driver was standing on the brake pedal with both feet (I'm assuming he ASSUMED this rather than actually being able to see the driver's feet on the pedal).

Now, the driver ignored the policeman's instructions to try to shut off power to the car, and I can understand his reluctance to comply. I don't know if ANYONE knows for sure that the 'transmission' of a Prius would keep spinning, albeit at an ever-slowng rate, if the power was cut, but going down the highway at 95 mph and chancing locking that puppy up solid and possibly sending the car into a spiraling roll from the pent up momentum would give ME pause too.

Shortly after the Prius incident, in the space of 2 days, three Toyotas (all Camry) had "acceleration problems". A man died when his Camry crashed through a guardrail, a woman's Camry slammed into her church's front steps and guardrails then down the walkway and across the street, taking out a small amount of stone wall, and a third crashed and rolled over.

Now what really interests me about these three 'accidents' isn't so much that they all occurred within the space of two days, but that they all occurred here in Connecticut.

Yep, out of about 330 million people in the country, these three accidents happened in a state of about 3.5 million. I have no doubt but that there either have been or will be many more incidents with these cars before this thing has run its course.

But WHY is it happening. It doesn't seem to be a case of the manufacturer cutting corners to save money, really, since the problem doesn't seem to be tied to a physical deficiency of any kind. It SEEMS (and I've got to stress that part) to be tied more to software or firmware... some bug in the code that these cars run on. Of course, it remains to be seen if that really is the case, since tests by both the manufacturer and outside testers doesn't seem to indicate that kind of a problem. When that happens, the company of course surmises operator error. But these three incidents so close together in such a short amount of time should tell us something.

So now Toyota is saying that they'll test these cars again and see if they can figure out what's wrong for REAL this time. Yeah, I know, I added the emphasis myself, but c'mon, what's the deal with that? Did they REALLY think that the software involved in these systems couldn't be the cause? Have these people ever SEEN what some of this stuff looks like?

On a very real note, I'm guessing that the answer to that is a resounding "no".

You see, although Toyota has sold more than 20,454,000 cars in the United States in the last ten years, the 'special laptops' that they use for diagnosing problems in these 'onboard systems' are in short supply.

The estimate I've heard two or three times about how many of these computers are available here in the states for diagnosing these problems is...

ONE. Yes, that's right. For the approximately 6.6 million Toyotas sold in the United States between 2007 and 2009 (the range of the suspected trouble), there is exactly ONE of these diagnostic tools available. Oh, and it's a beta model too.

The company says that they hope to have up to a hundred of them available sometime this year, but we'll see how that works out.

Now, there IS a reason for me mentioning this, and it's not to bash

Toyota. I have very fond memories of my first car, which was a used Toyota Corona station wagon. Yeah, go ahead and laugh if you want to, but that old rattle trap kept me from having to buy a new car for almost three years. It served me quite well for those three years.

Anyway, the reason I mention "the Toyota thing" is that it fits one of my long-held beliefs about what happens when you assume that you can't make a particular mistake because you are... well, because you are you.

Toyota will emerge from this... unless there's more that we still haven't seen, like cars falling apart on the highway or the paint fumes from new cars killing kittens or spotted owls or something... and they will hopefully emerge stronger and smarter than before. That's the essence of learning. Maybe they'll be able to teach that particular lesson to whatever American car companies that happen to be left by then.. THEY don't seem to be as interested in learning anymore. They're more caught up in trying to find a quick fix for their stock prices these days. Their product is now that all-important stock price, not the cars and trucks that they used to take such pride in. Those are now just inconvenient steps on the way to their final prize... a prize they now feel entitled to.

Well, that's about it for this week, kiddies. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Atari-Powered Simulator!  
    "*****" Sony PS3 Will Win in the End!  
    'Final Fantasy XIII' Falls Flat!  
    And more!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Sony PlayStation 3 Will Win in the End

The Sony PlayStation 3 may be the number-two console now, but one analyst group predicted that the console will be the last man standing. The firm also speculated on when the industry will have to start shifting consumers to next-generation devices.

Strategy Analytics said Monday that it predicts that the PS3 will still be a commercial platform five years after Nintendo replaces its Wii.

Strategy Analytics predicted that Sony will sell 127 million PS3s over the course of the console's life, although the console will still remain runner-up to the Wii in terms of annual sales. Nintendo will sell 103 million Wiis over the course of the console's existence, the firm said; it did not release anticipated Xbox 360 lifetime sales.

For 2010, SA predicted that sales of the Wii are expected to reach 17.5 million units; the PlayStation 3 will sell 14.0 million; the Xbox 360, 10.5 million; and the PS2, 5.5 million.

"Nintendo has done a great job with the Wii in bringing console games to new audiences," said David Mercer, principal analyst, in a statement. "But its sales are now falling, particularly in mature markets, and its installed base will peak in 2011. Ownership of both the PS3 and the Xbox 360 will hit their highest points between 2012 and 2014."

Strategy Analytics predicts that the game console market will dip 9 percent in 2010, although the installed base will hit 220 million by the end of 2010.

But, by 2011, SA predicts that the game console market will have peaked in terms of sales. At that point, the industry will have to look ahead toward next-generation boxes, the firm said. When will that happen? SA didn't give a concrete time, but indicated that both PS3 and Xbox 360 ownership will peak between 2012 and 2014.

Meanwhile, both Sony and Microsoft appear to be exploring porting their respective gaming console architectures into new directions. Sony has called reports of a PlayStation phone "speculation," but Microsoft chief executive Steve Ballmer has publicly mentioned the possibility of new form factors for the Xbox.

'Final Fantasy XIII' Falls Flat

During the 1990s, the Square brand was synonymous with the role-playing video game. A generation of gamers got hooked on the challenging quests, quirky characters and sweeping story lines of Square RPGs like "Chrono Trigger," "The Secret of Mana" and, of course, the "Final Fantasy" series.

Over the last decade, though, the Japan-based company - now Square Enix - has ceded the RPG crown to U.S. developers. Games like Bethesda Softworks' "Fallout 3" and BioWare's "Dragon Age: Origins" have all the epic drama of Square's classics, while adding grittier stories, real-time combat and free-roaming exploration.

Still, as a gamer who's devoured almost every "Final Fantasy" chapter, I've been eagerly awaiting "Final Fantasy XIII" (Square Enix, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, \$59.99). And it breaks my fanboy heart to acknowledge how disappointed I am with it.

The adventure begins in the floating city of Cocoon, where humans are protected by a mysterious race called the fal'Cie. A rogue fal'Cie from Pulse, the world underneath Cocoon, breaks loose, and some humans are branded as l'Cie, servants of the aliens. They're targeted for elimination by Cocoon's government, but several escape and set out on a mission to rescue a friend.

There are six primary characters, and they are some of the most irritating people ever to appear in a game. There's surly soldier Lightning, cocky stud Snow, whiny orphan Hope and spacey chatterbox Vanille - no one you'd want to have lunch with, much less spend the dozens of hours it takes to complete "XIII." I did grow to like Sazh, who comes off at first as a Chris Tucker impersonator but turns out to be the one sensible guy in the gang, and late arrival Fang delivers some much needed sex appeal.

For the first 25 hours (really), the characters are split into groups of two or three as they explore Pulse. The story is strictly linear, with no towns to visit, no interesting side characters, no off-the-beaten-path missions to pursue. "XIII" settles quickly into a dull rhythm: fight, walk, fight, watch a non-interactive cut scene, fight, save your game.

"XIII" does have its rewards. This series has long delivered on the eye candy, and Square has pulled out all the stops for its first installment on the current generation of high-definition consoles. The landscapes, whether urban or bucolic, are breathtaking, and the character animation is vividly lifelike.

The battles are built on an innovative engine. You control one character, while the others in your party are computer-operated. But you can change your teammates' specialties on the fly, so if you're taking too much of a beating, you can have one character focus on healing rather than fighting. I still miss the combat of previous "FF" games, which let you control all your characters' actions more precisely, but the alternative here is faster-paced and still demands some strategic thinking. And there's an unusually deep assortment of monsters and human villains to fight.

"Final Fantasy XIII" does pick up steam about two-thirds of the way through, as the characters' stories coalesce and the action branches out beyond the straight-ahead path. Unfortunately, I suspect many players - especially series newbies - will lose patience long before then. Two stars out of four.

'Uncharted 2' Nabs 5 Trophies at Video Game Awards

"Uncharted 2: Among Thieves" stole the show at the Game Developers Choice Awards.

The high-octane PlayStation 3 action-adventure game developed by Naughty Dog won five trophies at the Game Developers Conference ceremony Thursday, including game of the year. "Uncharted 2," which casts players in the role of globe-trotting treasure hunter Nathan Drake, was also honored Thursday evening for best writing, audio, technology and visual art.

"It's one thing to have an idea," said art director Robh Ruppel, "but you really need a great crew to make a game."

"Uncharted 2" foiled fellow game of the year nominees Rocksteady Studios' "Batman: Arkham Asylum," Ubisoft Montreal's "Assassin's Creed II," From Software's "Demon's Souls" and BioWare's "Dragon Age:

Origins." The unstoppable PlayStation 3 exclusive previously nabbed three prizes at December's Spike TV Video Game Awards, including game of the year.

Selected by a jury of game creators, the Game Developers Choice Awards honor the best games of the past year. The 10th annual ceremony was hosted by "Deus Ex" and "Epic Mickey" lead designer Warren Spector. The show was capped off with the debut teaser trailer for "Deus Ex: Human Revolution," the third installment in the futuristic role-playing game franchise.

Other winners at the Moscone Convention Center ceremony included 5th Cell's word-happy puzzler "Scribblenauts" for best handheld game and innovation, Rocksteady Studios' stealthy "Batman: Arkham Asylum" for best game design, Runic Games' fantasy outing "Torchlight" for best debut game and thatgamecompany's free-flowing "Flower" for best downloadable game.

"Think about what you can do to affect the people around the world, not just for entertainment or distraction but something that's deeper and more meaningful," "Flower" designer Jenova Chen told the crowd of game makers during his speech.

John Carmack, the id Software co-founder and lead programmer of such games as "Doom" and Quake," was awarded the lifetime achievement award. Gabe Newell, Valve Corp. co-founder, won the pioneer award and used his speech to tease the upcoming sequel to "Portal." Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik and Robert Khoo of Penny Arcade received the ambassador award.

Earlier in the evening, several trophies were handed out at the 12th annual Independent Games Festival Awards. Pocketwatch Games' "Monaco" won the top honor, taking home the \$20,000 Seumas McNally grand prize for best independent game as well as the award for excellence on design. Other indie winners included Cactus' "Tuning" and PlayDead's "Limbo."

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->A-ONE Gaming Online      -      Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Atari-Powered Simulator Offers Educational Opportunity

It s not every day that a person can put the words 'Atari 2600' and 'education' together.

Welcome to every day in Chad Shumaker s 8th-grade science classroom at Claymont Junior High.

A self-proclaimed Classic Gamer, Shumaker owns a rather large collection of classic video game systems such as the Atari, Intellivision, Colecovision and Vectrex and recently bought a 1983 game titled 'Space Shuttle: A Journey Into Space' produced by Activision. The game is a space shuttle simulator, and Shumaker envisioned having his students learning

about space with the help of the game.

"I am a firm believer that kids learn the most when they can work with something hands on," Shumaker said. "Yes, lecture and notes sessions are important, as are tests and quizzes, but kids really look forward to lab days!"

"They know they will get to produce, witness or experience something cool that may just teach them something in the process."

Simply buying the game wasn't enough for Shumaker. He wanted to take the experience to the next level.

And that level includes an actual cabinet to house the game.

So Shumaker talked with friend and social studies teacher Jordan Beebe, a woodworker in his free time, to coordinate the building of his cabinet.

What began on Feb. 15 blossomed into a very cool cockpit similar to those found in video arcades for racing games.

Eighth-grader Dylan Sterling said that the setup of the simulator made the 25-year old graphics come to life.

"The space shuttle simulator is amazing," said Sterling. "Even though the graphics weren't very good, it still seemed very realistic thanks to Mr. Shoe talking to you from outside (the students wear headsets inside and Shumaker guides them with a walkie-talkie outside of the cabinet.)"

"The whole setup is great. I hope we keep toying with it for the rest of the year."

Eighth-grader Kelly Tantarelli added that the experience taught her about more than just space.

"It wasn't like a normal video game but it was really fun," said Tantarelli. "It gave me an idea of how hard it must be for actual astronauts."

The space shuttle simulator is 3 feet wide, 5 feet tall and 4 1/2 feet long and the cost was a meager \$250.

"I have to say that Mr. Beebe did an incredible job," Shumaker said. "I told him what I was thinking about and he took it and ran with it. He made the blueprint in his mind and it only took a day to build."

"And I have to give props to (Principal) Scott Golec because he was excited when I told him what I wanted to do and he gave us the funding we needed to complete this project."

Beebe said he couldn't wait to build the cabinet.

"It's been a lot of fun seeing how excited the kids are after they are in it," Beebe said. "They have a lot of enthusiasm for it."

Beebe said his services are available for other educational projects - within reason.

"If you need a house built, probably not, but if you need a flight simulator, I guess I'm an expert," he said with a laugh.

Contained within the simulator is the Atari 2600 VCS Unit, the earliest version of the system. The unit also houses a joystick that is "pilot style" and cost just \$1 at Goodwill.

Finally, the coup de gras is a comfortable chair and a 19-inch Zenith Space Command Television purchased from a thrift store. "This works just fine and was what the Atari 2600 was intended to be used with in the first place," Shumaker said.

The students sit in the chair and close a curtain to feel as though they really are in a cockpit. They put on the headphones and Shumaker guides them through space, tackling different parts of the game.

"When we talk about the concept of space, it's very difficult for the students; they have a tough time imagining how big the universe really is," Shumaker said. "This allows them to see aspects of space while breaking it down in a way they can understand. What is great is that now, they don't even refer to it as a game. They call it the simulator."

And you can't simulate that excitement.

Contained within the simulator at Claymont Junior High is the Atari 2600 VCS Unit, the earliest version of the system. Here is some background on one of the first game systems:

- The Atari 2600 is a video game console released in October 1977. It is credited with popularizing the use of microprocessor-based hardware and cartridges containing game code, instead of having non-microprocessor dedicated hardware with all games built in. The first game console to use this format was the Fairchild Channel F; however, the Atari 2600 is credited with making the plug-in concept popular among the gaming public.
- The console was originally sold as the Atari VCS, for Video Computer System. Following the release of the Atari 5200, in 1982, the VCS was renamed 'Atari 2600,' after the unit's Atari part number, CX2600.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Report Finds Online Censorship More Sophisticated

Repressive regimes have stepped up efforts to censor the Internet and jail dissidents, Reporters Without Borders said in a study out Thursday.

China, Iran and Tunisia, which are on the group's "Enemies of the Internet" list, got more sophisticated at censorship and overcoming dissidents' attempts to communicate online, said Reporters Without Borders' Washington director, Clothilde Le Coz.

Meanwhile, Turkey and Russia found themselves on the group's "Under Surveillance" list of nations in danger of making the main enemies list.

Although Zimbabwe and Yemen dropped from the surveillance list, that was primarily because the Internet isn't used much in either country, rather than because of changes by the governments, Le Coz said.

Reporters Without Borders issued the third annual report ahead of Friday's World Day Against Cyber Censorship, an awareness campaign organized by the Paris-based media advocacy group.

Le Coz said repressive regimes seemed to be winning a technological tussle with dissidents who try to circumvent online restrictions. She said some U.S. technology companies have been aiding the regimes by selling products that could be used for such censorship, or by cooperating with authorities and requests for censorship.

Companies she cited include Cisco Systems Inc., which has been criticized by activists who say that it sells networking equipment that could be used in official efforts to monitor and control Internet use. In a statement Thursday, the company reiterated that it does not provide any government with any special capabilities, and said products sold in China are the same ones sold elsewhere.

Reporters Without Borders said it was optimistic about Google Inc.'s public threats to leave China if the Silicon Valley powerhouse cannot reach a deal that lets the company offer search results there free of censorship.

"A year from now, I would be happy to tell you that Google opened the path," Le Coz said. "That's a bit idealistic."

In fact, she worries that more democratic nations would be joining the list.

Australia is among the countries under the group's surveillance for its efforts to require Internet service providers to block sites that the government deems inappropriate, including child pornography and instructions in crime or drug use. Critics are worried that the list of sites to be blocked and the reasons for doing so would be kept secret, opening the possibility that legitimate sites might be censored.

In Russia, newly added to the watch list, politically active bloggers have been increasingly arrested, Reporters Without Borders said. In Turkey, several sites, including the video-sharing service YouTube, have been blocked.

China and Tunisia, meanwhile, have employed increasingly sophisticated filtering, while Iran stepped up its Internet crackdown and surveillance amid a disputed presidential election last summer. Countries such as China have defended their Internet practices and accused critics in the U.S. in particular of "information imperialism."

Joining those three countries on the main enemies list are Cuba, Egypt, Myanmar, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

Chinese Minister Insists Google Obey The Law

China's top Internet regulator insisted Friday that Google must obey its laws or "pay the consequences," giving no sign of a possible compromise in their dispute over censorship and hacking.

"If you want to do something that disobeys Chinese law and regulations, you are unfriendly, you are irresponsible and you will have to pay the consequences," Li Yizhong, the minister of Industry and Information Technology, said on the sidelines of China's annual legislature.

Li gave no details of Beijing's talks with Google Inc. over the search engine's January announcement that it planned to stop complying with Chinese Internet censorship rules and might close its China-based site.

"Whether they leave or not is up to them," Li said. "But if they leave, China's Internet market is still going to develop."

China has the world's most populous Internet market, with 384 million people online. Google has about 35 percent of the Chinese search market, compared with about 60 percent for local rival Baidu Inc. Chinese users of Google and even some of China's state-controlled media have warned the loss of a major competitor could slow the industry's development.

Beijing encourages Internet use for education and business but tries to block access to material deemed subversive or pornographic, including Web sites abroad run by human rights and pro-democracy activists.

Li insisted the government needs to censor Internet content to protect the rights of the country and its people.

"If there is information that harms stability or the people, of course we will have to block it," he said.

A Google spokeswoman, Courtney Hohne, declined to comment on the status of contacts with the Chinese government or when the company might start stop censoring search results.

Responding to Google's complaints of China-based hacking against its e-mail service and several dozen major companies, Li said the government opposes hacking.

Google CEO Eric Schmidt said Wednesday the company is in active negotiations with Beijing and expects some resolution in the dispute soon.

Speaking at a conference in the United Arab Emirates, Schmidt declined to provide specifics or predict how long the discussions would last. He said Google has decided not to publicize details of the talks.

Even if the China-based Google.cn search site is shut down, Google wants to keep a Beijing development center, advertising sales offices and a fledgling mobile phone business, according to a person familiar with the company's thinking.

Google will not say how many employees it has in China, but industry analysts estimate the workforce at 700. The company, based in Mountain View, California, employs about 20,000 people worldwide.

Beijing has rejected suggestions by Western security experts that

China's military or government agencies might have been involved in the hacking.

"You cannot find evidence about who organizes such attacks. The Chinese government has repeatedly opposed and deterred hacking attacks," Li said.

US To Allow Web Service Exports to Strict Nations

Washington will allow technology companies to export Internet services to Iran, Cuba and Sudan in a bid to exploit their libertarian potential, The New York Times reported late Sunday.

"The more people have access to a range of Internet technology and services, the harder it's going to be for the Iranian government to clamp down on their speech and free expression," a senior administration official told the paper.

The Treasury Department will issue a general license Monday for exports of free personal Internet services such as instant messaging, chat and photo sharing as well as software to all three countries, said the unnamed official.

The move will allow Microsoft, Yahoo and other Internet services providers to get around strict export restrictions, the report said.

Until now they had resisted offering such services for fear of violating existing sanctions.

But there have been growing calls in Congress and elsewhere to lift the restrictions, particularly after Iran's post-election protests illustrated the power of Internet-based services such as Facebook and Twitter, The Times said.

Internet Access Is a Universal Right

The right to life, liberty, and Internet access? Approximately four in five adults worldwide believe that access to the Internet is a fundamental right, according to a Monday report from the BBC.

The BBC commissioned GlobeScan to interview more than 27,000 adults in 26 countries between December 2009 and January 2010. Of those surveyed, 87 percent of those who use the Internet think Internet access should be a "fundamental right of all people," while 71 percent of non-Internet users also believed they should have the right to go online.

Of the 1,035 Americans who were polled, 51 percent strongly agreed and 25 percent somewhat agreed that Internet access should be a fundamental right. Ten percent somewhat disagreed, while 11 percent strongly disagreed.

Countries with the highest percentage of people who "strongly agreed" that they have a right to Internet included Mexico (86 percent), Brazil (83 percent), and South Korea (71 percent). Pakistan was at the lower end of the spectrum, with only 12 percent in strong agreement (34

percent somewhat agreed).

In China, where the country's regulation of the Internet has been called into question, about 53 percent strongly agreed and 34 percent somewhat agreed that residents had a right to access the Web. Only 5 percent and 2 percent somewhat or strongly disagreed with that statement, respectively.

China also had the highest percentage of respondents who were most concerned about state censorship of content, at 29 percent. Only 6 percent of people in the U.S. had similar concerns.

The study also asked respondents if the Internet should be subject to regulation "by any level of government anywhere." In the U.S., 32 percent of respondents strongly agreed and 25 percent somewhat agreed that it should not be regulated. About 22 percent and 20 percent somewhat or strongly disagreed, respectively.

The countries most open to regulation were Pakistan, Turkey, and China, where only 12 to 16 percent of respondents strongly agreed that the Internet should never be regulated.

The report found that Americans are more likely than most to say that the Internet has given them greater freedom - 85 percent compared to 78 percent worldwide. Internet users in the U.S. are mostly likely to express this freedom through speech, and 55 percent say that the Internet is a safe place to express their views, compared to 48 percent worldwide. Of most concern to Americans, however, are fraud and loss of privacy.

Though the majority believes the Internet should be a right, what would happen if it ceased to exist? Could people handle it?

When asked if they could cope without the Internet, about 34 percent of Americans strongly agreed that they could survive, while 30 percent somewhat agreed.

Others were less inclined. Only 4 percent of Mexicans and 9 percent of Japanese and Chinese were in strong agreement that they could cope without the Web. The same goes for 12 percent of respondents in South Korea and Russia, and 14 percent of Egyptians.

The countries that were most confident that they could cope without the Internet were Brazil (53 percent), the Philippines (44 percent), and Spain (42 percent).

In October 2009, Finland's Ministry of Transport and Communications ordered telecom providers to be ready to provide "every residence and business office with access to a reasonably priced and high-quality connection" by 2015. France made Internet access a human right, but Finland was apparently the first country to make it a legal right.

Finland was not among the countries polled by BBC.

In the U.S., the Federal Communications Commission is expected to deliver a plan for nationwide broadband access to Congress later this month.

Cyber-Bullying Cases Put Heat on Google, Facebook

The Internet was built on freedom of expression. Society wants someone held accountable when that freedom is abused. And major Internet companies like Google and Facebook are finding themselves caught between those ideals.

Although Google, Facebook and their rivals have enjoyed a relatively "safe harbor" from prosecution over user-generated content in the United States and Europe, they face a public that increasingly is more inclined to blame them for cyber-bullying and other online transgressions.

Such may have been the case when three Google executives were convicted in Milan, Italy on February 24 over a bullying video posted on the site -- a verdict greeted with horror by online activists, who fear it could open the gates to such prosecutions and ultimately destroy the Internet itself.

Journalist Jeff Jarvis suggested on his influential BuzzMachine blog that the Italian court, which found Google executives guilty of violating the privacy of an autistic boy who was taunted in the video, was essentially requiring websites to review everything posted on them.

"The practical implication of that, of course, is that no one will let anyone put anything online because the risk is too great," Jarvis wrote. "I wouldn't let you post anything here. My ISP (Internet Service Provider) wouldn't let me post anything on its services. And that kills the Internet."

A seemingly stunned Chris Thompson, writing for Slate, said simply: "The mind reels at this medieval verdict."

And Matt Sucherman, a Google vice president and general counsel, wrote in a blog post that the company was "deeply troubled" by the case, saying it "attacks the very principles of freedom on which the Internet is built."

Legal experts have been more sanguine, saying the verdict in Milan will most likely end up an outlier - unable to stand the scrutiny even of the Italian appeals courts, never mind setting legal precedents elsewhere.

But in sentencing the executives to six-month suspended jail terms, the court may have seized on a growing desire to hold Internet companies responsible for the content posted by users.

"I actually think that this is probably not a watershed moment because the Google convictions violate European law and ultimately they will be overturned," said John Morris, general counsel for the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Democracy and Technology.

"Having said that, yes we are quite worried about the trend in other countries to suggest Internet service providers and Web sites should be the policemen of the Internet," Morris said.

If the trend takes hold, it could put the companies on the defensive, forcing them to spend more time defending such cases or fending off calls to restrict content in some way.

China polices the web and demands cooperation from web companies, while the United States has stuck up for Internet freedom in the face of

censorship by more repressive governments.

But social pressure often comes from the ground up, as Facebook recently found out in Australia.

In that case Facebook pages set up in tribute to two children murdered in February, 8-year-old Trinity Bates and 12-year-old Elliott Fletcher, were quickly covered with obscenities and pornography, prompting calls for the social network to be more accountable for its content.

"To have these things happen to Facebook pages set up for the sole purpose of helping these communities pay tribute to young lives lost in the most horrible ways adds to the grief already being experienced," Queensland Premier Ann Bligh wrote to Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg in a letter released to the Australian media.

"I seek your advice about whether Facebook can do anything to prevent a recurrence of these types of sickening incidents," Bligh said in the letter.

A Facebook spokeswoman responded that the popular social network, which has more than 400 million users worldwide, had rules to check content and that any reports of hate or threats would be quickly removed.

"Facebook is highly self-regulating and users can and do report content that they find questionable or offensive," the spokeswoman, Debbie Frost, said.

Calls for prosecution of cyber-bullying first reached a peak with the case of a suburban mother accused of driving a love-lorn 13-year-old girl, Megan Meier, to suicide in 2006 by tormenting her with a fake MySpace persona.

Lori Drew, the mother of a girl with whom Meier had quarreled, was found guilty of misdemeanor federal charges in a case dubbed the "MySpace Suicide" in the U.S. media, but a judge later dismissed her conviction on the grounds that the prosecution was selective the law unconstitutionally vague.

But Meier's death and a series of child exploitation cases linked to News Corp's MySpace brought pressure on the site to increase its security measures and may have cost it in its apparently losing rivalry with Facebook for social network dominance.

Such issues point to the business risks for the likes of Google and Facebook as they seek to reconcile demands for accountability with the impossibility of monitoring everything posted on their sites.

"We are a society that expects companies and people of authority to take responsibility, not only for their own actions but for the actions of those beneath them," said Karen North, director of the Annenberg Program on Online Communities at the University of Southern California.

"The difficulty is, we've created an Internet culture where people are invited to put up content, but the responsibility falls in both directions," North said. "(On the Internet) we all share the responsibility to monitor the content that we find and for our societal standards to be maintained."

PayPal Recommends Anti-Phish Plugin

Paypal is recommending that users install the Iconix eMail ID software.

The free Iconix application integrates into many popular mail clients in order to call out those messages which have been verified as sent by one of a list of over 1500 senders including, obviously, PayPal, banks, credit card companies, major retailers, and other popular sites like Monster.com and The New York Times.

The verification is based on existing e-mail authentication standards; Iconix says they use "...technologies like DKIM, Domain Keys and Sender ID...", all of which DNS-based services and special mail headers to confirm that a particular message was actually sent by the e-mail domain it purports to come from.

iconix2.jpgIn the nearby example, a message from Facebook has been confirmed as coming from Facebook. Click on the special icon for that message in your e-mail client and this verification box pops up.

DKIM is DomainKeys Identified Mail, a standard established many years ago and led by Yahoo! and Cisco. It uses public key encryption to prove not only that the message sender is authenticated, but that it has not been modified in transit.

Any mail domain can implement these standards, but Iconix is only verifying particular ones. This is good because a sender is not trustworthy just because they are verified. So Iconix is picking only trustworthy senders.

It's a shame that e-mail clients need an add-in to display this information. Standards exist for mail clients to interact with 3rd party verification/accreditation services, such as Iconix, so that the client could implement this capability natively. Thus far, to my knowledge, only webmail clients do this.

Iconix works with Gmail, MSN Hotmail, Windows Live Hotmail, Yahoo Mail, Outlook 2003/2007, Outlook Express, Earthlink, AOL Webmail, AIM Webmail, Mac and Linux are not yet supported.

Hat tip to Finextra.

FCC Releases Internet Speed Test Tool

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission on Thursday launched a broadband test service to help consumers clock the speed of their Internet.

Located at the site www.broadband.gov, the test is aimed at allowing consumers to compare their actual speeds with the speeds advertised by their providers.

The FCC release follows an FCC meeting in September where officials said that actual speeds were estimated to lag by as much as 50 percent during busy hours.

"The FCC's new digital tools will arm users with real-time information about their broadband connection and the agency with useful data about service across the country," FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski said in a statement.

The FCC is also collecting information about where broadband is not available. Consumers can email the FCC at fccinfo@fcc.gov or call the FCC.

Lender Putting www.sex.com Domain on Auction Block

Sex.com, often touted as one of the most valuable Internet domain names, is due to head to the auction block next week.

DOM Partners LLC, a New Jersey lender that backed a 2006 purchase of the domain name for a reported \$14 million, is foreclosing on the Internet property, and is due to auction it on March 18 at New York law firm Windels Marx Lane & Mittendorf LLP, according to legal notices.

Bidding for the Internet property, the tumultuous past of which includes several lawsuits and two books, is due to start at \$1 million.

The auctions of simple domain names are seen as rare opportunities for Internet entrepreneurs.

An auction for the www.pizza.com domain name in 2008 attracted bids above \$2.5 million.

But if it is true that sex sells, sex.com may be the most valuable domain name in the world. At one point, the website was making at least \$15,000 per day, according to a 2008 book, *The Sex.com Chronicles*, by attorney Charles Carreon who has represented a former owner of the site.

In January 2006, Escom LLC acquired the domain name from Gary Kremen, founder of dating website Match.com and chief executive of Grant Media. Kremen registered the sex.com domain name in 1994.

A press statement announcing the 2006 sale said it was "believed to be among the most significant domain sale transactions in history." Terms of that deal were not disclosed, but it has since been reported that the deal was worth about \$14 million.

DOM Partners' loan to Escom for the deal has been in default for over a year.

"The loan was in default and DOM partners is foreclosing pursuant to its right under the security agreement," DOM's attorney Scott Matthews said.

Attempts to reach Escom and sex.com for comment were not immediately successful.

But Richard Maltz, an auctioneer at Maltz Auctions who is running the sale, said on Monday there was considerable interest in it.

"We don't know who's serious and who's not, but prospective bidders need a \$1 million certified check. It should be interesting."

Maltz said his firm was arranging for potential buyers to also be able to bid online.

No .xxx Yet: Internet Agency Delays Porn Decision

Porn Web sites can't park themselves at a ".xxx" address quite yet.

A global Internet oversight agency on Friday deferred a decision until June on whether to create a ".xxx" Internet suffix as an online red-light district.

The board of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, initiated a 70-day process of consultations on a domain that could help parents block access to porn sites. Use of the ".xxx" suffix would be voluntary, though, and would not keep such content entirely away from minors.

Backers of ".xxx" have billed the proposal as a way for the adult-entertainment industry to clean up its act, though some porn sites worry that governments would wind up mandating its use, and religious groups are concerned it would legitimize porn sites.

Skeptics also note that porn sites would likely keep their existing ".com" storefronts, even as they set up shop in the new ".xxx" domain name, thereby giving people even more ways to find pornography online.

ICM Registry LLC first proposed the ".xxx" domain in 2000, and ICANN has rejected it three times already since then. But an outside panel last month questioned the board's latest rejection in 2007, prompting the board to reopen the bid.

"There's a lot of complex issues," ICANN CEO Rod Beckstrom said, without elaborating.

As it concluded weeklong meetings Friday in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, ICANN's board gave its chief executive and its chief lawyer two weeks to recommend options for the agency to proceed. Once the ICANN board receives the options from them, it will open them to public comment for 45 days and then make a decision at its June meeting in Brussels.

Stuart Lawley, ICM's chief executive, said he is looking forward to seeing proposals in the next 14 days.

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